

# *Sketch*

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## Sea-Fog

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# Sea-Fog

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## **Abstract**

DARKNESS was thick over the water as the destroyer 374 turned up its broad wake into the fog. The water was dark, broken only by an occasional white-cap as the wind and currents tormented it. The bridge chronometer showed half-an-hour past midnight when a mechanical voice broke from the squawk-box.

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**D**ARKNESS was thick over the water as the destroyer 374 turned up its broad wake into the fog. The water was dark, broken only by an occasional white-cap as the wind and currents tormented it. The bridge chronometer showed half-an-hour past midnight when a mechanical voice broke from the squawk-box.

“Steering by port unit, port cable, condition normal, sir.”

Ensign Eldean R. Dayton reached for the steering aft switch and pushed the speak button, “Steering aft, bridge, very well.”

The Officer of the deck was grinning. “That’s not necessary, Dean. Just say ‘bridge, aye’. That’s enough.”

Ensign Dayton jerked his head in reply. Destroyer 374 was his first assignment, and he was trying to follow the book. He envied his superior’s easy, almost casual manner of handling himself.

An instructor at the college NROTC unit had carried himself in much the same way; the elbow resting on the podium, the fingers deftly gripping chalk that never smeared the blue uniform.

Those were the easy days, just as his father had said.

Plenty of social life, a date once or twice a week where you'd talk foolishly about the next examination or a big campus election. Only a grade-point to worry about then, and a second and third chance at that.

"It's not like that when you're working for a living," his father had said. And it wasn't. Not here at the conn of a ship where every action counted, where every decision could be made but once, and where a man's future was decided by the rightness or wrongness of that decision.

Fog rolled in heavily as Dayton leaned over the plotting board and peered through the windshield. The five-inch mount was visible behind streamers of fog but the bow of the destroyer disappeared in the black shroud.

"Too bad the windshield wipers can't clear it away, isn't it?" The O. O. D. mirrored Dayton's thoughts.

A thin smile played with the corners of his mouth as Dayton looked up at his superior outlined against the green glow of a radar repeater. "Yes, sir, it is. Especially in these waters. We can't see half the length of the ship."

"Oh, for pete's sake, Dean, call me by my first name when we're alone up here. We're only one rank apart." The man stretched out a hand and leaned on the binnacle.

"Sure, Ray, if that's what you'd like." He turned away wishing he had said something about being strictly courteous on the bridge.

The damp night washed against his face from the open ports around the bridge. The ship's lights shone bravely out and made a glow around each port and door before fading into the enveloping gray. A chart of the North Sea area lay on the plotting board, parallel ruler and dividers arranged neatly on the top. A thin red line moved jerkily over the blue representation of water and angled close to the Orkney Islands.

"Well, guess I'll go below and get some coffee while I pick up the new charts, Dean."

Dayton busied himself with the navigation tools. "We'll be passing close aboard to the Islands soon." His voice was high and urgent.

Ray hesitated with one foot on the ladder. "Well, you know what to look for. A white beacon flashing two longs and three shorts, total of ten seconds. You'll make out all right. And watch for small craft. They're thick here." His

form bounced down the ladder and out of sight below.

The fog opened a little. The bow cut the black water with a whispering sigh as the tree branch cuts the wind. The pitometer read 17 knots. If the fog didn't disperse soon C. I. C. would have to feed information about course and speed to the bridge to avoid the islands and stay in formation. Not even the running lights of the other ships could be seen. And he was supposed to look for a white beacon!

The radar showed the column formation. Destroyer 374 was falling slightly behind its appointed position. Dayton's fingers slowly grasped the voice tube to the pilot house. "Make one-six-six r.p.m." The ringing bells sounded clearly through the tube.

"One-six-six, up and answered for, sir."

"Very well."

He replaced the tube, stepped to the radar and watched the brilliant green dots move. The ship was still losing ground. If only the running lights were visible it would be so much easier to estimate range.

"Make one-six-nine r.p.m." Again the clanging bells as the engine room responded.

"One-six-nine, up and answered for, sir."

"Very well."

The dots seemed to stabilize then and Dayton let the breath whistle through his teeth.

The fog was still heavy and Dayton leaned against the plotting board reviewing commands to be given in emergency situations. The memory of a fellow junior-officer who got his engine-orders mixed during a man-overboard drill was still fresh. Casey, the dummy, had been ground to bits in the screws when the ship swung around in the wrong direction.

The blasting the captain gave the poor ensign was awful. Dayton felt hollow after he listened to the brimstone lecture, and now his old fear of his commander's wrath welled up again.

"Let's see now — collision." Dayton's lips moved slightly as he repeated emergency orders in his mind. "First, general alarm, then the siren and howler. Then pass the word by master communicator. Notify the captain if there's time." He shifted his weight and looked into the fog.

"For fire. First, general alarm, then the bell. One stroke

if the fire is forward; amidships, two; aft, three. Then pass the word by boatswain's pipe."

His hand clenched on a pair of dividers. He stared around the bridge. Only impersonal machines and instruments with green and red eyes looked back. Every thing capable of aiding his decisions was at his fingertips; but it was no comfort.

The fog opened a little and he watched solid shapes take form. "My God, are those lookouts asleep?" His voice cracked in its urgency. The shapes drifted closer, intersecting the ship's course. Dayton almost ran the few steps to the voice tube. Its fastening wouldn't work in his hurrying hands. His eyes looked for the shapes, again. They had vanished, disturbed by a breeze. Dayton's shoulders sagged as he watched the fog close in. His hand trembled as he thought of the consequences of breaking formation to avoid a little fog.

Dayton made fists of his hands and stood stiffly erect with his eyes closed as he fought for self-control. He could feel himself sweating in the cool night air.

He bent over the plotting board and manipulated the ruler and divider, placing a small "x" for the location of the ship. It was time to change course toward the Orkneys. He unfastened the voice-tube carefully. "Steer course zero-nine-six." The helmsman's "Aye, aye." answered him. He watched dials move a pointer to the new course and swing past, then come back.

"Steady on course zero-nine-six, sir."

He answered, "Bridge, aye," and grinned.

Ray would have been proud of him. His muscles relaxed then and he drew a long breath. He strode around the bridge, enjoying the sight of the complicated instruments, marvelling at the way they stood, serene in their metal cases, while showing constantly changing data. The darkness was beautiful now and the fog, with its grasping tendrils, seemed almost a friend to be welcomed, it was that soft and peaceful.

Routine reports came in on the half-hour. Dayton adjusted the ship's speed again and shifted steering to starboard unit, starboard cable. The chronometer read 0215 when it happened.

He was scanning the water and vaguely wondering when

Ray would decide to come back when a white light caught the corner of his eye.

It shouldn't have been there. His mouth gaped open and his forehead wrinkled. The light diffused through the fog looking bright as the sun on a cloudy day. He gripped a knob on the magnetic compass and stared for several seconds. It was dead ahead and only 300 yards away by quick estimate.

The distance decreased rapidly and Dayton's face wore an anguished look, green light casting shadows over his eyes. The light was low in the water, probably a local fishing boat of the kind that showed a light only when absolutely necessary. Dayton thought of a time when he was almost as frightened and unsure of himself as he was now. It was an irrational flash-back, the kind that comes when a person should have his entire mind on the immediate situation. He was delivering a college speech and a girl he wanted to date was sitting in the front row looking up at him.

The light looked up from a very short distance and three men were visible, their forms black through the fog. They labored over the nets and spared no glance for the fast approaching destroyer.

"Mustn't break formation unless it's really necessary but those guys don't seem to see me. Oh, why don't they move that thing." He spoke aloud to force an image of the captain's stark face from his mind.

The small floats on the fishing net were visible when Dayton made his decision.

No time to notify the captain and let him decide, no time to do anything but try to swing the ship away. He pulled down the voice-tube and tried to speak normally.

"Hard right rudder. Starboard engine, back, full. Port engine, ahead, full." He listened carefully and shook his head in relief when the helmsman repeated the order correctly.

There was nothing to do now but watch the three men in their boat. They still labored with the nets, pulling in a load of fish. The ship trembled as the screws bit into the water. The vibration went through Dayton's body and he shivered with tension.

The ship began to change course slowly and the bow began to swing away from the fragile fishing vessel. The

boat was so close it disappeared under the flare of the destroyer's bow. Dayton clenched his teeth waiting for the splintering sound of wood on metal. Then the boat reappeared, with its occupants grasping the gunwhales, riding in the destroyer's turbulent sweep of water. The men waved gaily as if they enjoyed it.

"Damn you." Dayton spoke softly with a rueful smile and shook his fist half-heartedly at them. He was drained of all emotion, a bitter taste came into his mouth and his stomach wrestled with the pancreas.

The ship was circling hard to the right, heeled over at a sizable angle. Dayton turned and struggled uphill to the voice-tube.

"You just barely missed him, Mr. Dayton." The captain already had the tube and ordered the helmsman to his previous course. The ship slowed and came to the horizontal.

"Yes, sir, I - I didn't have time to call you, sir, the boat was so close." Dayton stood slack, waiting for the blast.

"I ran up when I felt the change of speed. You did right. From what I saw you acted as calmly as a qualified O.O.D. Congratulations."

"Th-Thank you, sir. I did my best. I'm glad you liked it, sir." Only half believing what he had heard, Dayton bent to the task of getting the ship back to position. His hands refused to make a straight line on the chart even with the ruler.

"That's it. Get us back where we belong, Mr. Dayton. Well, I think you can handle it. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

The cap with the braid disappeared down the ladder.

Dayton labored at the chart. It was slow work. Every muscle twitched and jerked against his will. But that didn't bother him. He grinned out at the fog and laughed in its face.

"Hey, Dean," Ray came running up the ladder. "What was that all about? You sure spilled the coffee in the mess hall."

"Oh, just a little fishing boat got in the way. I'm just getting us back in position now."

— *Arnold Beath, Sci. Soph.*